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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000594

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/29/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: CONTINUED EFFORTS TO ADVOCATE FOR THE
RELEASE OF JAILED YOUTH ACTIVISTS

REF: BAKU 580 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: International and local efforts continue in Azerbaijan to encourage the GOAJ to release detained youth activists Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade. Deputy Foreign Minister (and uncle of the First Lady) Hafiz Pashayev told the Charge that has already once tried to get the President to release these activists, but will try again to appeal to him. Charge and A/DCM also met with Presidential Advisor Ali Hasanov, who refused to comment in detail on the case, but admitted that it had caused damage to Azerbaijan's reputation. Embassy officials also met on July 28 with Hajizade's father, former deputy prime minister and opposition activist Hikmet Hajizade, who said he was attempting to use family connections to send a message to President Aliyev about his son. Hikmet Hajizade hope for a response from the President within two to four days, and asked for further, stepped-up action from the international community if the answer is not satisfactory. End Summary.

FIRST LADY'S UNCLE SAYS IT WAS UNNECESSARY

12. (C) On July 29, Deputy Foreign Minister Hafiz Pashayev told the Charge that he had already encouraged the President not to arrest these activists, but would again try to encourage the President to release them. He said that he did not know who was doing "such unnecessary things," and that it is likely that this action was taken without an instruction from the President. Pashayev said that presidential advisors often tell the President that certain people are dangerous and must be dealt with, without specifying that they are insulting the President personally.

13. (C) Pashayev clarified that while he personally disagrees with the arrests and makes no excuses for them, he viewed the donkey video and found it "disgusting." He added that it would appear that these two activists have exceeded the limits of what is tolerated in Azerbaijan by calling the donkey "Mr. President." In fact, the government has now created two heroes out of otherwise unknown young guys, he lamented. He predicted that these two activists would likely be released following their two months of pre-trial detention, then play important political roles in the upcoming 2010 parliamentary elections.

14. (C) The Charge asked Pashayev to pass the message that if the two activists receive harsh jail sentences, this would

become an unwelcome irritant in our bilateral relations. Pashayev counseled quiet diplomacy, adding that the President remained suspicious that the donkey video and other anti-government messages were coming from Washington.

PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR ADMITS CASE IS DAMAGING

15. (C) On July 28, the Charge and A/DCM met with Presidential Advisor on Media and Politics Ali Hasanov to discuss the case of the jailed youth activists. Hasanov began by saying that this was a law enforcement matter and therefore he would not be able to make any substantive comment on the issue. The Charge persisted in making several points about the manipulation of the judicial system, the damage to the President's image and Azerbaijan's relations with the West, as well as a call to examine the evidence and release the two activists if the evidence was lacking. True to his word, Hasanov stared back blankly and did not respond.

16. (C) The Charge returned to the topic later and asked Hasanov about his and the President's comments suggesting that harsh actions were taken in order to protect the statehood of Azerbaijan. Hasanov denied having ever made the comment to government-friendly APA news service, instead saying that the only comment he has made on the subject was to the New York Times. He added, "In my personal opinion, the arrest of these two men has done more to hurt the image of Azerbaijan than any of their activities." The Charge concluded with the hope that the government would treat this case like a fight in a restaurant and release the two

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individuals soon. If the courts give long prison sentences to these men, the Charge added, it will be clear to the world that they are being punished for alleged insults to the President. (NOTE: In a separate meeting, human rights defender Arzu Abdullayeva told poloff that Ali Hasanov told a group of human rights defenders at the July 14 French Bastille Day Reception that Milli and Hajizade would be freed within two months, although it was not clear whether this meant "free" or "free pending trial." END NOTE.)

HAJIZADE'S FATHER USING BACKCHANNEL COMMUNICATION

17. (C) A/DCM also met on July 28 with Hikmet Hajizade, former Azerbaijani ambassador to Russia, long-time opposition figure and father of jailed youth leader Adnan Hajizade. He has not been able to see his son, but from his lawyer's report, he said Adnan is doing fine in detention, and has no complaints about the conditions in the newly built pre-trial detention center. Hajizade said that he is sending messages to President Aliyev through some of Aliyev's close relatives, asking what is going to happen to his son and explaining that this story brings shame to Azerbaijan's international reputation. Hajizade expects to hear back in 2-4 days from these contacts, and, if the response is not satisfactory, he hopes the international community will turn up the pressure on the GOAJ. So far, however, he has been happy with the reaction from the international community and Azerbaijani society. He believes the only reason his son is not being beaten in prison is the international attention his case has received. Hajizade believes the GOAJ is hoping people will forget about the story, so continued international attention is vital. He also explained that the well-known attorneys defending the youth activists are working pro-bono on the case, a signal of the importance attached to the case by Azerbaijani society.

18. (C) Hajizade also explained that this case was different than the 2003 wave of arrests of youth activists in that the previous group of activists had been politically aligned to the opposition. In contrast, he explained that the new group of youth activists, which includes his son and Emin Milli, are Western-educated and more interested in forming networks

than active participation in opposition parties. He explained that these young people have good jobs and are largely happy with their lives. Therefore, Hajizade believes that these young people actively protesting the arrests of his son and Milli is a new and positive step for Azerbaijan.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Hajizade's use of family connections in order to get a message to President Aliyev is typical of the way relationships are used in this small country. Hajizade was somewhat hopeful that this non-confrontational method would produce a positive result for his son. In addition, Hasanov's admission that the case is damaging Azerbaijan's reputation is a positive signal. The Embassy will follow up with Hajizade, as well as continue to express concern over the detentions at all levels of the GOAJ.

¶10. (C) It is certainly true that in the quiet month of August, this case will receive little attention with concerted effort by the international community and local human rights defenders. The Embassy recommends the following steps to remind the government of our continuing interest in this case:

-- (SBU) Urge the Greek OSCE chairperson-in-office to raise its profile on this issue.

-- (SBU) Coordinate our position with the EU and Council of Europe to encourage interventions on their part.

-- (C) Prepare a letter from the Charge to President Aliyev.

-- (SBU) Continue to seek meetings with the Foreign Minister and Chief of Presidential Administration.

-- (C) Raise the issue with the President during the

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mid-August visit of EUR DAS Bryza.

-- (SBU) Prepare if-asked press guidance for Washington given the multiple international press stories on this issue.

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